



# The Huntsville Times

## PK-20: education for the future

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**For The Times**

A fast-paced world can't afford to lose a single student

The Alabama Commission on Higher Education is asking the Legislature for money to support a PK-20 system in Alabama. The time is now, not later, to bring all educational parties and industry leaders together to decide a course of action that will benefit all Alabamians. Employment opportunities are knocking; we must answer with an educated work force.

What is a PK-20 system? It is a system that consolidates established and proven educational activities with industries' current resources and future needs. The creation of a comprehensive PK-20 system will not only better prepare Alabama students for the jobs of the 21st century, but will also enhance our state's economic competitiveness. Similar initiatives in other states already are successfully delivering well-prepared work forces.

### Recent benefits

Alabama has recently benefited from an upsurge in economic development, which has brought more jobs and opportunities to the state. According to the Alabama Development Office, there were 24,073 new jobs in Alabama last year, creating a record investment of \$6 billion. However, with that good news there are challenges; revenue shortfalls projected for next year will affect state services and public education.

All roads should lead to cooperation among educational levels and industry in order to equip and prepare students to enter the job market. That involves curriculum choices and program development to meet industry needs.

Today, we are able to use data to determine when public school students exit the system. Our next step is to reduce the dropout rate and to provide the necessary tools to help students continue their education.

A PK-20 system identifies the strengths already in place, such as the Reading Initiative, AMSTI, ACCESS, technical training, and research; then helps to bridge the gap early for those students having difficulties in specific areas and ensures that the process and opportunities are relevant for advancement.

Our fast-paced world can no longer afford to lose any student. Even job training doesn't go far enough if it's geared to an economy that no longer exists.

The U.S. economy has moved from a base of agriculture and manufacturing to one of information and technology in every field. When knowledge becomes the commodity that drives an economy, education is the common denominator. It is the key to helping people help themselves to support their families and allows them to contribute to societal needs.

The implementation of a well-developed education plan must be set in motion. Through education we will be able to respond to changing economic climates in a positive, proactive manner. Education is an investment! Through it, we provide our citizens a better overall lifestyle and place our state in an even better position to compete in a global economy.

Yet, education and industry must engage early in a student's career to align course work with advanced instructional preparation focusing on future employment. This strategy should start before kindergarten, with specific criteria to be met throughout a student's education. There must be a balance between work force development and research that can be created within a PK-20 environment.

A more cooperative and consolidated effort will provide expanded educational opportunities for students, reduce the number of dropouts, and increase high school and college retention and graduation rates. The costs related to remedial/transitional education will thus decrease, expediting the creation of an educated, marketable work force - a key component to economic development.

Large-scale strategy

So, how do we create and maintain these opportunities?

Wednesday, a plan to bring all parties to the table was presented in a joint meeting of the Alabama State Board of Education and the Alabama Commission on Higher Education. Elected and appointed officials heard a presentation on the PK-20 Initiative - a strategy to provide a seamless system of education aligning educational resources with industry needs while providing ongoing support for students. It will help fill cracks throughout the educational pipeline by combining resources that directly address the relevant needs of all our students.

Combining the strengths of our educational system with industry's needs will pay huge dividends in the future. But, to make this a reality, specific goals must be defined and met. This strategy can evolve through a state PK-20 system that specifically targets process and content. Many states throughout the nation are tailoring educational components to industry needs, moving them ahead of Alabama. We must respond!

What's the end result?

A strong work force and a better prepared employee to meet the demands of today's competitive work environment. Whether the goal is to be a general laborer or a research scientist, education and training are key ingredients to ensure Alabama's competitive market edge now and in the future.

Gregory Fitch is executive director of the Alabama Commission on Higher Education.

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